SCRIPT FOR AUDIO INTERPRETATION OF 1950S SHIP-BOARD RADIO TELEPHONE

While we were developing the exhibit in our basement exhibit shop, a gentlemen from our neighboring Senior Center (whose wood shop is also in the basement) noticed our early 1950s radio telephone and questioned us about it. His name is John DeMeo, and he told us that he was a radio officer on the USNS General Pope during the 1950s. As it happened, out of the hundreds of ships in Suisun Bay, the early 1950s radio telephone we had secured for the exhibit came from the USNS General Pope. When I asked Mr. DeMeo if it could be the same equipment he had used during the Korean War, he said, Well, if it's from the Pope, it must be. He generously agreed to help us interpret the exhibit. Two of his audio scripts follow.

-- Richard Everett, Exhibits Curator, SF Maritime National Historical Park

SCRIPT 1

My name is John De Meo. I was a radiotelegraph operator who served aboard ships for 18 years within a span of 50 years. My most interesting service was with the Military Sea Transportation Service, an arm of the Navy.

In the 1950s, we were involved in three arctic operations resupplying the Distant Early Warning Radar sites, known as the DEW-LINE.

I served on Victory ships and in 1955 on a DEW-LINE operation, we were two operators serving 12-hour watches. If one man was on duty, the other was likely in his bunk.

The Victory radio room was one deck below the bridge. There was a buzzer from the radio room to the bridge and also a voice tube system. You blew into the tube to get the bridge's attention. On the other end of the tube it would create a whistle. Then the tube cap would be opened and you could, more or less, shout your message to the bridge. It wasn't really a shout, but at least a raised voice. You could put your ear close to the tube to hear. It was an adequate system for communicating with the bridge. For time signals, there was a switch that allowed us to send a signal to a set of earphones on the bridge.

The most grief we had as radio officers on single operator ships was with the auto alarm. The auto alarm was set to detect patterns of at least four dashes. When this occurred, alarms were heard in the radio room, the radio operator's quarters, and on the bridge.

The problem was that we often got false auto alarm signals, particularly in areas close to the tropics where there was huge static build-up. There was sensitivity control on the auto alarm. If you set the gain too high, the static would often set off the alarms. You'd have to go back and readjust the sensitivity.

However, despite the grief, this was an interesting occupation. We felt we were the nerve center of the ship with communications connections throughout the world. The radio operator was a true link to the outside world and the entire crew depended on his service for peace of mind.

SCRIPT 2

My name is John De Meo. I was a radio officer on the USNS *General Pope*.

We were involved in an incident in the China Sea in 1953 where we were standing a Port Radiotelephone Watch using the Mackay 214-D radiotelephone, like the one you see on the display to the left. We were communicating with Army and Navy vessels. While I was on watch, an incident took place that involved the loss of life.

We received a report from the bridge stating that there had been a collision in the harbor where an LST collided with an LCT loaded with U.S. Marine prisoners of the Korean War. The Marines were being repatriated to the United States. The LST flipped the LCT over and thrust the Marines, wearing life jackets, into the sea.

The ship's captain ordered me to advise the Navy in order to get whatever help was needed. I commandeered the net by transmitting the voice urgency signal. I gave it three times.

PAN PAN PAN, THIS IS THE USNS GENERAL POPE. PLEASE CLEAR THE AIR FOR COMMUNICATIONS INVOLVING IMMINENT LOSS OF LIFE

This finally cleared the busy airwaves. I got the full attention of the net and our vessel was the first to launch lifeboats to pick up survivors. As the Marines floated by in the strong current we became aware that as they nodded and dropped their heads, they became lifeless.

Within a period of 20 minutes we picked up bodies and survivors. I understood that 48 lives were lost, mostly due to hypothermia. It wasn't a case of drowning. It was the winter cold water in which they were immersed that caused the deaths. These ex-POWs did not make it back alive at the conclusion of the Korean War.